

Message Text

SECRET

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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 869
INFO AMEMBASSY BEIRUT IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 1239

EXDIS HANDLE AS NODIS

JERUSALEM FOR CONGEN AND USDEL

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: LE, PBOR, SY, IS PLO
SUBJECT: MEETING WITH PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: SOUTH LEBANON

1. AS THE LAST ITEM ON THE AGENDA OF THE MEETING ROY
ATHERTON AND I HAD THIS MORNING WITH BEGIN (REPORTED
SEPTELS), THE PRIME MINISTER VOICED HIS DEEP CONCERN
OVER DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTH LEBANON. HE SAID THE SHTAURA
AGREEMENT HAD NOW BECOME " COMPLETELY THEORETICAL". THERE
WERE CURRENTLY NEARLY 3,000 WELL-ARMED PLO STRUNG ALONG
ISRAEL'S NORTHERN FRONTIER. THE GOI HAS CONFIRMED
INFORMATION OF LARGE SHIPMENTS OF SOVIET ARMS FROM
LIBYA. HEAVY WEAPONS ARE BEING BROUGHT IN, INCLUDING
TANKS. THE ISRAELIS ARE CONVINCED THAT THE SOVIETS
ARE BEHIND THESE DEVELOPMENTS AND ARE USING LIBYA
AS THE CONDUIT. THIS IS CREATING THE POTENTIAL FOR A
VERY DANGEROUS SITUATION FOR ISRAEL. THE OUTLOOK FOR

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THE CHRISTIAN FORCES IS MORE BLEAK THAN EVER. HE REQUESTED
THAT WE IMMEDIATELY ASK OUR AMBASSADORS IN BEIRUT AND
DAMASCUS TO RAISE THIS ISSUE IN AN EFFORT TO DEFUSE THE
SITUATION.

2. DAYAN SPOKE UP AND REMINDED US THAT, AS HE PUT IT,
HE HAD "NOT BEEN VERY EXCITED ABOUT SHTAURA." HE SAID

HE USUALLY WAS WRONG, BUT THIS TIME HE HAD BEEN RIGHT. WE HAD PUT PRESSURE ON THE GOI TO WITHDRAW FROM SOUTH LEBANON AND NOW WE WERE ALL REAPING THE HARVEST OF THIS MISTAKE. BEGIN BROKE IN TO ASK WHAT THE WORD "PRESSURE" BE STRUCK FROM THE RECORD. HE THOUGH "INFLUENCE" WAS THE BETTER DESCRIPTION. AT ATHERTON'S SUGGESTION, WE ALL AGREED THAT "PERSUASION" BEST CHARACTERIZED THE SITUATION. DAYAN SAID WHATEVER THE RIGHT TERM, THE ISRAELIS HAD ACCEPTED A CEASE FIRE AND HAD WITHDRAWN THEIR FORCES. NOW THEY FACED A SITUATION IN WHICH THE PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS WERE BEING SUBSTANTIALLY REINFORCED BOTH IN MANPOWER AND IN FIREPOWER, UNDER COVER OF THE CEASE FIRE. WHERE WAS THIS LEADING? HE SPECULATED THAT THERE MIGHT BE A PLAN BETWEEN THE SYRIANS AND THE PLO TO PERMIT THE PLO TO TAKE OVER THE BULK OF THE SYRIAN ARMY'S OCCUPATION DUTIES IN THE SOUTH. THIS WOULD BE VERY DANGEROUS FOR ISRAEL. HE ASKED WHAT OUR REACTION WOULD BE IF ISRAEL ATTEMPTED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE SITUATION.

3. WEIZMAN THEN SPOKE UP TO NOTE THAT IF ONE LOOKED AROUND FOR THE BEST SPOT FOR THE SYRIANS TO ATTEMPT TO TORPEDO ISRAELI CHANCES FOR A PEACE AGREEMENT WITH THE EGYPTIANS, SOUTH LEBANON WAS IT. MOREOVER, SYRIA KNOWS THAT STANDING ALONE ITS MILITARY POWER AS COMPARED TO ISRAEL'S IS GROSSLY INSUFFICIENT. THIS IS THE REASON IT IS RAPIDLY REARMING WITH MODERN, SECRET

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SOPHISTICATED WEAPONRY. IT ALSO EXPLAINS SYRIANS EFFORTS TOWARD RAPPROCHEMENT WITH THE IRAQIS. I INTERRUPTED TO NOTE THAT WHILE WE AGREED THERE CLEARLY WERE EFFORTS TO HEAL THE ESTRANGEMENT BETWEEN SYRIA AND IRAQ, WE DIDN'T GIVE MUCH CHANCE FOR THEIR SUCCESS. WEIZMAN RESPONDED THAT WHATEVER THE CASE, THEY WERE BOUND TO CONTINUE TRYING. OF ONE THING HE WAS CERTAIN: THE MORE ISRAEL'S RELATIONS IMPROVED WITH EGYPT, THE GREATER THE EFFORT THE SYRIANS AND IRAQIS WILL MAKE TO BRIDGE THEIR DIFFERENCES. ATHERTON OBSERVED THAT DUE TO THE PRONOUNCED IDEOLOGICAL NATURE OF THE SPLIT, HE WAS VERY SKEPTICAL WHETHER IT WAS SUSCEPTIBLE TO HEALING.

4. IN RESPONSE WEIZMAN RECALLED THAT THERE WAS A CERTAIN RHYTHM IN THE ARAB WORLD OF RUPTURES AND OF COMING TOGETHER AGAIN. ALTHOUGH HE AGREED THAT THERE WAS A QUALITATIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE SITUATION NOW PERTAINING BETWEEN THE SYRIANS AND IRAQIS, THE IMPACT OF SADAT'S INITIATIVE HAD CHANGED FUNDAMENTALLY THE ENTIRE MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE. HE REMAINED VERY CONCERNED THAT SOUTH LEBANON COULD BE THE POINT OF A NEW FLARE-UP. HE REPEATED THAT THE BUILD-UP

AMONG THE FATAH FORCES WAS SO RAPID THAT SOON THEY
COULD ALMOST REPLACE THE SYRIAN PRESENCE. THIS RAISED
THE SPECTRE OF THE PALESTINIANS BEING IN A POSITION
TO TRIGGER ANOTHER CIVIL WAR. I SAID I COULD NOT BELIEVE
THE LEBANESE CHRISTIANS COULD EVER ACCEPT THE PALESTINIANS
IN THE GENDARME ROLE THE SYRIANS WERE PRESENTLY PLAYING.
IT WAS INCONCEIVABLE TO ME THAT THE CHRISTIANS IN THE
NORTH WOULD ALLOW THE PALESTINIANS TO TAKE OVER IN
THIS MANNER. NONETHELESS, I DID AGREE THAT THE PALESTINIANS
HAD THE POTENTIAL FOR IGNITING ANOTHER CIVIL WAR.
AS FOR THE DEMISE OF THE SHTAURA AGREEMENT, THE SIMPLE
FACT WAS THAT IT FAILED TO BE IMPLEMENTED BECAUSE ASSAD
LOST INTEREST AFTER SADAT'S VISIT TO JERUSALEM. IT
SUDDENLY BECAME VERY NECESSARY FOR HIM TO PRESERVE HIS
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RELATIONS WITH THE PLO. AT THE PRESENT TIME, WE SAW NO
WAY TO INFLUENCE ASSAD TO BRING ANY SIGNIFICANT
PRESSURE ON PALESTINIAN FORCES IN SOUTH LEBANON.

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EXDIS HANDLE AS NODIS

JERUSALEM FOR CONGEN AND USDEL

5. NOTING THAT THE SOUTH LEBANESE SITUATION WAS ALSO VERY MUCH ON OUR MINDS, I SAID THIS WAS TOPIC ON THE AGENDA FOR A MEETING OF OUR AMBASSADORS IN THE AREA WHICH ATHERTON WAS CONVOKING IN AMMAN THIS WEEKEND. WE WOULD BE ANALYZING THE SITUATION IN DETAIL AND MAKING AN EFFORT TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WE MIGHT DO TO EASE THE SITUATION. ATHERTON ADDED THAT OUR INFLUENCE IN DAMASCUS IS "NOT AT PEAK LEVEL AT THE MOMENT." AND, UNFORTUNATELY, PRESIDENT SARKIS' INFLUENCE ON EVENTS IN SOUTH LEBANON IS ALMOST NIL.

6. I THEN ASKED WEIZMAN CASUALLY WHAT ISRAEL'S ATTITUDE WOULD BE IF SOME SMALL UNITS OF THE LEBANESE ARMY WERE TO MOVE SOUTHWARD AND ESTABLISH THEIR PRESENCE IN MARJAYUN AND NABATIYA (SEE BEIRUT 0368). WEIZMAN QUICKLY RESPONDED THAT HE THOUGHT THIS WAS NOT A GOOD MOVE TO MAKE AT THIS POINT. IN HIS VIEW FOR THE PRESENT
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IT WAS MUCH BETTER TO MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO WITH THE CHRISTIANS RETAINING CONTROL OF THEIR ENCLAVES. I ASKED WHAT THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS WERE CONCERNING THE REPORTED CHRISTIAN OFFENSIVE IN AL-BALAT. WEIZMAN LOOKED PERPLEXED AND SAID THAT HE HAD HEARD NOTHING ABOUT IT. HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WAS TALKING ABOUT. (IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE MEETING GENERAL PORAT TOOK DCM VIETS ASIDE AND ASKED HIM TO INFORM ME THAT WHILE WERE STILL TALKING HE HAD TELEPHONED THE NORTHERN COMMAND FOR DETAILS ON MY INQUIRY. HE HAD BEEN TOLD THAT ALL WAS QUIET, THAT THERE HAD BEEN A MINOR DUST UP BETWEEN THE CHRISTIANS AND PALESTINIANS IN AL-BALAT, BUT THAT THERE HAD BEEN NO "OFFENSIVE" OR ANYTHING RESEMBLING IT.

7. DAYAN RETURNED TO THE QUESTION OF THE SYRIANS. IF WE WOULD NOT INFLUENCE THEM FOR THE REASONS WE HAD MENTIONED, HE AGAIN ASKED WHAT OUR REACTION WOULD BE IF ISRAELI MILITARY FORCES AGAIN WERE TO UNDERTAKE OPERATIONS IN SOUTH LEBANON. I ANSWERED THAT FRANKLY I DID NOT KNOW. IT SEEMED TO ME THE FIRST QUESTION WAS WHAT THE EFFECT WOULD BE ON ISRAEL'S CHANCES OF SUCCESSFULLY CONTINUING PEACE NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE EGYPTIANS. BEGIN QUICKLY SAID, "THERE WOULD BE NO EFFECT." DAYAN WAS MORE CAUTIOUS. HE SAID HE REALLY DIDN'T KNOW THE ANSWER, BUT HE DID NOT THINK THE PLO SHOULD HAVE A FREE HAND IN SOUTH LEBANON WHILE ISRAEL WAS NEGOTIATING WITH THE EGYPTIANS. REVERTING TO HIS QUESTION, I SAID THAT HISTORICALLY SPEAKING WHERE THERE HAD BEEN A CLEAR CUT ATTACK ON ISRAEL TO WHICH THE GOI HAD BEEN FORCED TO RESPOND, OUR REACTION HAD BEEN VERY DIFFERENT THAN IN INSTANCES OF "PREEMPTIVE" ISRAELI

ACTIONS, BUT THAT WAS PAST HISTORY AND I COULD NOT
RESPOND WITHOUT INSTRUCTIONS TO HIS QUESTION. I SAID
WE AGREE THAT THE CURRENT ARMS BUILD-UP IS DANGEROUS
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AND WE SHARED THE ISRAELI DEEP CONCERN ABOUT THE POTENTIAL
CONSEQUENCES. BEGIN TERMINATED THIS PORTION OF THE
CONVERSATION BY NOTING THAT HE WAS VERY PLEASED TO LEARN
ABOUT OUR AMBASSADORIAL CONFERENCE THIS WEEKEND. HE
SAID HE WOULD LIKE TO MEET WITH ATHERTON AND ME AS SOON
AS POSSIBLE AFTER WE RETURNED IN ORDER TO CONSULT FURTHER
ON THE SOUTH LEBANESE PROBLEM.

8. COMMENT: ONE THING IS CLEAR. THE ISRAELIS ARE VERY
CONCERNED ABOUT THE ARMS BUILDUP IN SOUTH LEBANON. THE
SIGNAL WAS LOUD AND CLEAR: SOONER OR LATER THEY BELIEVE
THEY WILL HAVE TO CROSS THE BORDER "TO TAKE CARE OF THE
PROBLEM". BUT IT SEEMED ALSO CLEAR THAT THEY HAVE NOT
YET FIGURED HOW HIGH THE COST WOULD BE TO THEIR BUDDING
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EGYPTIANS, OR WITH US. FOR THE
PRESENT, AT LEAST, I BELIEVE WE SHOULD RETAIN A CLEARLY
AMBIGUOUS POSITION ON THE QUESTION.
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